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# CPRG CHRONICLE

A newsletter for public policy and governance enthusiasts'



## SCO



# DECEMBER 2022 HIGHLIGHTS



## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY

- The First Finance & Central Bank Deputies (FCBD) Meeting under India's G20 Presidency was held from 13-15 December, 2022 at Bengaluru.
- India will assume the chairmanship of the Wassenaar Arrangement (WA) a multilateral technology control agreement on 1st January 2023 for a period of one year
- 18th Meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security and Border Management between India and Bangladesh held”
- INS - Vagir Fifth Scorpene submarine to be commissioned into the Indian Navy
- India has recently launched a “Group of Friends” to promote accountability for crimes against peacekeepers



## SOCIAL

- Capacity-Building Project Launched to Empower local communities in helping Rejuvenate the Ganga
- The 7th India Water Impact Summit, organised by the National Mission for Clean Ganga and Center for Ganga River Basin Management and Studies was held from 15th to 17th December.
- UN recognized Namami Gange as one of the top 10 World Restoration Flagship Programmes
- 9th World Ayurveda Congress, organised by Ayush Ministry was held at Goa
- The 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) which aims to protect 30% of the world's land and seas by 2030.
- 'Right to Repair' Portal Launched by Ministry of Consumer Affairs





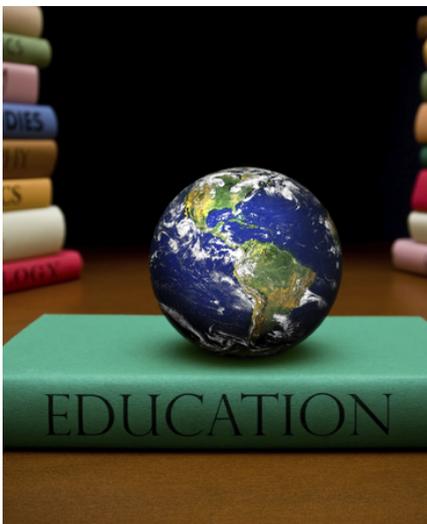
## ECONOMY

- The Government of India started disbursing Jeevan Pramaan Patra using the network of Postmen and Gramin Dak Sevaks in the country.
- RBI unveiled a 4-tiered Regulatory Framework for Urban Cooperative Banks
- 94 Financial Institutions have onboarded themselves on Account Aggregator (AA) platform as Financial Information User (FIU)
- Gross Direct Tax collections for the Financial Year (FY) 2022-23 register a growth of 25.90%
- India and ADB signed \$125 million loan to improve urban services in Tamil Nadu



## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

- ISRO and Social Alpha sign MoU to establish “SpaceTech Innovation Platform”
- Supreme Court launches online RTI portal
- Ministry of Power has launched the plan titled “Transmission System for Integration of over 500 GW RE Capacity by 2030”
- e-HRMS 2.0 portal and Probity portal launched by the Government of India on Good Governance Day
- AVGC Task Force calls for the launch of 'Create in India' Campaign



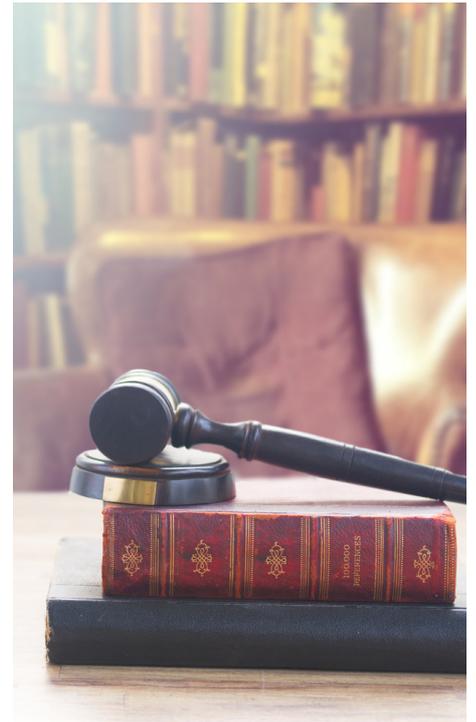
## EDUCATION

- The Ministry of Education with the help (NCERT) conducted the Mental Health Survey emphasizes students' mental health and well-being in order to provide holistic development
- Government announced a Centrally Sponsored Scheme named “New India Literacy Programme” (NILP) for implementation during five years from 2022-23 to 2026-27.
- The number of female students enrolled in STEM Courses increased from 4,19,7186 in 2016-17 to 4,38,7248 in 2020-21.



## TRAINING & GOVERNANCE

- Good- Governance Week 2022 was celebrated from 19-25th December
- Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba launches Approach Paper on Annual Capacity Building plans under “Mission Karmayogi”
- Parliament passes Energy Conservation (Amendment) Bill, 2022
- Parliament passes New Delhi International Arbitration Centre (Amendment) Bill, 2022
- Atal Innovation Mission and UNDP India launch 5th edition of Youth Co: Lab
- Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs launched Environment Social Governance impact programme under the aegis of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs



# PARLIAMENTARY TRACKER

**'REVIEW OF EDUCATION STANDARDS, ACCREDITATION PROCESS, RESEARCH, EXAMINATION REFORMS AND ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT IN DEEMED/PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES/OTHER HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES'**



## **Abstract**

On 4th July 2022, the Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports presented to the Parliament the 341st Report on “Review of Education Standards, Accreditation Process, Research, Examination Reforms and Academic Environment in Deemed/Private Universities/Other Higher Education Institutes.” The report looked at the situation of higher education in India, in light of the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), and the challenges facing Higher Education Institutes (HEIs).

## **Introduction**

The report covered a variety of topics and issues, ranging from the need for reforms in higher education, the provisions and objectives of NEP 2020, status of the initiatives taken by the Ministry of Education with regards to improving the higher education landscape and accreditation process, role of banks in funding of higher education, etc. Various stakeholders like the University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education, National Board of Accreditation, National Assessment and Accreditation Council, Association of Indian Universities, and representatives from various Higher Education Institutes gave their inputs to the Committee. The Committee also undertook visits to numerous HEIs in order to understand the ground reality. Based on all of these, the Committee made some observations, and then gave its suggestions and recommendations. The Report comprised of 7 chapters, with numerous sub-chapters, with the Observations, Suggestions and Recommendations bookending the Report

## Chapter 1

The first chapter provided a backdrop of the higher education landscape in India, its potential for growth, and emphasised on the need for reforms owing to rapid technological advancements in the present-day world. It was noted that in today's day and age, "the emphasis has shifted on critical thinking and analysis process rather than simply rote learning, from not only what to learn but how to learn. Today's requirement of education, therefore, is to shift the Pedagogy towards more holistic, experiential and inquiry-driven coupled with a matching curriculum." The need to bring the Indian education system at par with global standards was realised.

## Chapter 2

The National Education Policy 2020 was drafted with the aim of bringing about sweeping reforms in the Indian education system. Some of the important provisions of NEP 2020 are as follows:

- Reforms in higher education, such as shift towards multidisciplinary universities, faculty and institutional autonomy, revamped curriculum and pedagogy, enhanced access, equity and inclusion through online education and Open Distance Learning, etc.
- Multidisciplinary universities ending fragmentation of higher education and promoting holistic education to ensure all-round development of students
- Internationalisation of higher education, by encouraging Indian universities to set up campuses abroad, permitting some foreign universities to operate in India, enhancing research collaboration and student exchange programmes with global institutions, etc.
- Revamping teacher education
- Professional education to become a critical part of higher education
- Promoting high quality research, by setting up a National Research Foundation which would inculcate a culture of research across India
- Setting up a common regulatory regime for the education sector, i.e., National Higher Education Regulatory Authority (NHERA), which would operate in a 'light but tight' manner
- Higher Education Grants Commission to be set up, which would take care of funding and financing

## Chapter 3

The Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, provided a status note of the situation of higher education, and of the various initiatives undertaken in areas like education standard, research and academic environment, examination reforms, and accreditation.

With regards to education standards, the Education Ministry and the UGC established 141 universities during the last 3 years, and enabled the digital reach of higher education. To enhance research and development capabilities and inculcating a start-up culture, initiatives such as setting up Research Parks in IITs, IMPRINT (Impacting Research and Innovation Technology) and Uchhatar Avishkar Yojana (UAY) were undertaken. IMPRINT aims to provide solutions to engineering challenges and translating knowledge into technology, while UAY promotes industry-relevant innovation. To attract talented students to pursue research in science and technology, the Prime Minister's Research Fellowship and the ASEAN Fellowship Scheme have been introduced.

Other initiatives include: Research Promotion Scheme promoting research in technical disciplines; setting up of Indian Knowledge System division at AICTE to promote interdisciplinary research on IKS; IDEA-Labs (Idea Development, Evaluation & Application) in technical institutions to support new age learning and 21st century skills.

With regards to examination reforms, the National Testing Agency (NTA) conducted the Common University Entrance Test for admission into central universities, for both under-graduation and post-graduation programmes, so as to simplify the admission process. Also, NTA launched the mobile application ‘National Test Abhyas’ to help candidates get access to mock tests free of cost. As for the AICTE, they also introduced examination reforms in 2018, and have been conducting workshops for Controller of Examination, Deans and Senior Faculty members of various universities regarding the same.

Moving on to accreditation, the NAAC has accredited 8868 institutions as of 25 January 2022, and there has also been a consistent rise in the number of programmes accredited by the NBA over last 5 years. The NAAC would simplify its accreditation process, by reducing the parameters from 96 to 57 and addressing regional variations. The NEP envisages that “a stage-wise mechanism for granting graded autonomy to colleges, through a transparent system of graded accreditation, will be established and colleges will be encouraged, mentored, supported, and incentivized to gradually attain the minimum benchmarks required for each level of accreditation.” The goal is to develop every college into an autonomous degree-granting college over a period of time.

#### Chapter 4

In response to a detailed questionnaire sent by the Committee, the Department of Higher Education provided information on many aspects of the subject, especially in relation to NEP 2020.

- Estimated Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education in India, for the age group 18-23, stands at 27.1%. For the following groups, the figures stand at: SCs (23.4%), STs (18%), males (26.9%), SC males (22.8%), ST males (18.2%), females (27.3%), SC females (24.1%), ST females (17.7%).
- NEP parameters have been put in place in all Manuals for the process of assessment and accreditation, since December 2021.
- UGC initiated measures to bring multidisciplinary education, to prepare students to develop deeper skills and approach problems with broader perspectives. These include formulation of a draft National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF), revision of the Choice Based Credit System and has draft Curricular Framework and Credit System developed for Four-Year undergraduate programme, etc.
- For improving education standards and promoting research, AICTE has launched outcome-based model curriculum for Diploma, Undergraduate and Post-Graduate Courses in engineering and PGDM/MBA courses.
- To encourage institutions to have accreditations of courses being conducted by them, technical institutions are to have 60% of their programmes NBA-accredited in the next four years, else no extension of approval will be granted.

- UGC initiatives to improve education quality are: Deekhasharambh, (Student Induction Programme), Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) in 31 Undergraduate subjects, Jeevan Kaushal (Curriculum for Life Skills), credit course curriculum for 30 hours on “Fostering Social Responsibility Community Engagement of HEIs in India”, policy document on “Enabling and Enhancing University and Industry Linkage”, guidelines for Evaluation Reforms, policy document on ‘Student Career Progression and Alumni Network’, Guru Dakshta (guidelines for Teacher Induction Programme), PARAMARSH (scheme to mentor institutions seeking National Assessment and Accreditation Council accreditation), Handbook for Vice Chancellors - a ready reckoner guide for the essential knowledge domain required for the visionary functioning, book on Quality Mandate for Higher Education Institutions, etc.
- Modernization & Removal of Obsolescence (MODROB) scheme to provide financial support to institutions to equip their laboratories with modern equipment and upgrade infrastructure facilities.
- STRIDE (Scheme for Trans-disciplinary Research for India’s Developing Economy) to promote creation of new knowledge, inculcate innovative research culture and improve quality of doctoral research in socially relevant sectors.
- National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) launched for the purpose of skill development among students. To prepare an industry-ready workforce, UGC implemented the following schemes: Community College, B. Voc degree programme and Deen Dayal Upadhyay Kaushal Kendra. HEIs to offer skill-based programmes as per NSQF.
- UGC issued the Guidelines on Internationalization of Higher Education in July 2021, which provide for the establishment of Office for International Affairs and Alumni Connect Cell in the campuses of each University. Also, UGC has notified the UGC (Academic Collaboration between Indian and Foreign Higher Educational Institutions to offer Twinning, Joint Degree and Dual Degree Programmes) Regulations, 2022 in May this year.
- UGC developed guidelines on “Evaluation Reforms in Higher Educational Institutions”. The document provides a comprehensive view of evaluation, and covers different types of assessment by considering requisite learning attributes. The need for more proportion of testing based on internal assessment modes has been recognised. Other aspects like grading system and moderation have also been considered.

## Chapter 5

On the topic of funding in the higher education sector, the Committee interacted with bank representatives. SBI is extending financial assistance to private colleges/ deemed universities based on the commercial viability of the project for creation of movable / immovable properties, furniture / fixtures / lab equipment /college buses etc. and repayment capability based on the cash flows. Currently, SBI loans upto INR 5 crore per borrower for setting up of Schools under Social Infrastructure are eligible for classification as Priority Sector Advance. RBI may consider including HEIs under this scheme, with an increased threshold of upto INR 100 crores. The Indian Bank provides loans at reduced interest for premier institutes like IITs, IIMs, etc., as well as some interest rebate to girl students during the moratorium period. Indian Bank provides loans for: professional courses; approved courses leading to graduate/postgraduate degree and

PG diplomas conducted by colleges/universities recognized by UGC/AICTE/ICMR/NAAC-accredited 'A' rated institutions etc.; job-oriented courses for studying part-time courses and approved by the appropriate authorities; job-oriented specialized programmes which are offered in collaboration with foreign institutions, but may not have recognition in India.

Union Bank of India is extending credit assistance to Professional Education Institutions for setting up of the institute, purchase of the equipment, and towards the working capital requirement.

## Chapter 6

Representatives from the following stakeholders put forward their views before the Committee: Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, AICTE, UGC, NAAC, NBA, SGT University, Nirma University, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekanand Educational and Research Institute (RKMVERI), and AIU.

- UGC is reorienting its activities, whether academic or in governance, and also reviewing all regulations, including those concerning Deemed Universities, in order to push forward the vision outlined in NEP 2020. Issues relating to improvement of quality of education, promoting research and innovation, faculty development, collaboration with the industry and research laboratories, etc. are periodically reviewed with Vice Chancellors of Central Universities.
- AICTE is making sincere efforts to align its activities with the NEP, such as revamping of course curricula and empowerment of teachers.
- NBA has turned to Outcome-Based Accreditation by bringing in necessary changes in its process, parameters and criteria for accreditation. NBA accreditation process consists of the four stages, and to proceed to the next stage the institute must complete the previous one. The stages are: Initial Stage, Pre-Assessment Stage, Assessment Stage and Post-Assessment Stage (Decision-Making). The main problems facing the NBA are: small pool of evaluators who are well-versed with outcome-based accreditation, and deputation of evaluators by its parent institution, as and when required, for conducting the programs.
- NAAC highlighted that Indian universities are performing poorly in the public perception component, which takes into account the number of international students, student exchange programmes, number of international visiting faculty, etc. NAAC added the concept of “Institutional Preparedness for NEP” in the SSR profile section of the accreditation form, so as to gear up HEIs for NEP 2020.
- The Secretary of the Department of Higher Education highlighted that only 30% of the universities and 20% of colleges across India were in the accreditation system, and that these numbers need to be pumped up.
- The Vice-Chancellor of SGT University suggested accreditation-related reforms like streamlining the process for starting new courses and providing greater autonomy to universities, along with research-related reforms like UGC considering research proposals for competitive grants from institutions not under Clause 12B of the UGC Act, establishing Cluster Central Instrumentation Facility along with financial support, etc.
- The representative of Manipal Academy highlighted challenges such as maintaining balance between quantitative and qualitative education, too many regulatory bodies and malpractices

in conducting exams. Some suggestions were provided to counter these, like having a single overarching regulatory and accreditation body respectively, greater autonomy for premier institutions, and examination reforms like digitisation of the examination and evaluation system.

- The Pro-Chancellor of RKMVERI suggested that the UGC Act should be amended, so as to allow deemed universities to also use the term 'university.'

## Chapter 7

The Committee undertook visits to several Higher Education Institutes, so as to get a feel of the ground realities, as well as the status update of the reforms taken/set to be taken by the HEIs. The institutes covered by the Committee include: IIT Guwahati, Gauhati University, Assam Science and Technology University, Gauhati Medical College and Hospital, Guwahati College of Architecture & Planning, Central Agricultural University, Imphal, National Sports University, Imphal, Manipur University, IISc Bangalore, IIT Bombay, Institute of Chemical Technology, Mumbai and SNDT Women's University, Mumbai.

### Observations

The NEP 2020 initiated a drastic shift from traditional methods of teaching and learning to multidisciplinary education, as well as bringing in some much-needed reforms in areas like regulation of HEIs and entrance examinations. The Committee recognised the need for the following reforms in the higher education landscape:

- Curbing the commercialisation of higher education in India
- Setting up more universities, so as to achieve the GER target of 50% by 2035 set by the government
- Broad-based education with an interdisciplinary and inclusionary approach
- Contribution from other stakeholders like industries and banks
- A permanent mechanism to update and review the curriculum
- Streamlining the compliance and regulatory system
- Optimising infrastructure for enabling provision of hybrid education
- Easy access to credit from financial institutions, for the purpose of infrastructural support
- Building institutional leadership capabilities of governing body members of HEIs
- Encouraging innovators by enabling them to participate in the bidding process for government tenders
- Revising norms for online courses
- Encouraging HEIs to go for accreditation, since a small proportion of institutions have formal accreditation

### Suggestions

In light of the discussions with relevant stakeholders, the Committee gave the following suggestions:

- Appointing a study group to assess the performance of private and deemed universities, and reviewing relevant legislations such as Private University Regulation, 2003 and Deemed to be University Regulation, 2019

- Setting up more universities, so as to achieve the GER target of 50% by 2035 set by the govt and deemed universities, and reviewing relevant legislations such as Private University Regulation, 2003 and Deemed to be University Regulation, 2019
- Giving permission to research proposals irrespective of Section 12B of the UGC Act, 1956
- Department of Higher Education to recommend the services of premier educational institutions to Ministries for evaluating government schemes
- Merging NAAC and NBA into a single agency
- Encouraging engineering education in regional languages
- HEIs to consider introducing a structured mechanism to seek feedback from students at the end of semesters
- Setting up a special cell for EWS students; ensuring availability of resources and facilities to accommodate the requirements of specially-abled students, slow-learners, students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities
- Empanelling mental health professionals and therapists
- Create a framework for compulsory teaching of Financial Literacy at HEIs

### Recommendations

The Committee, after detailed discussions with the stakeholders, gave a total of 26 recommendations. In this summary report, we will look at each recommendation, and the progress made by the Government and the relevant authorities.

- The Committee taking note of the thrust areas and the proposed reforms as outlined for the Higher education sector in the National Education Policy (NEP)- 2020 recommends that the Department of Higher Education must formulate a visionary blueprint with a clear time bound roadmap and strict monitoring mechanism, towards each of the policy directions for their successful, effective and time-bound implementation.
- The Committee notes that the National Education Policy, 2020 envisages the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as the principal regulator for higher education, with four verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards and also a Bill to provide for HECI is under drafting stage. The Committee, in this regard, recommends that the aspects relating to protection of interests of stakeholders, clear demarcation of its jurisdiction to avoid any regulatory overlaps and gaps, independent nature with adequacy of resources and performance accountability be given due consideration. The Committee recommends that instead of having too many parallel regulatory bodies in the higher education sector, a simplified hierarchy of regulatory bodies may be constituted which will have a final say in implementation of Government rules/regulations/acts etc.
- The Committee recommends that the Department of Higher Education/ UGC and the Universities should collectively review the current state of academia-industry partnerships and take measures to strengthen them further as these can greatly help mitigate the shortage of skilled workforce. The Committee is of the view that such collaboration between the industry and the higher educational institutions would help students develop crucial entrepreneurship/ business skills, provide hands-on experience and help create a robust talent pool.

- The Committee appreciating the move towards establishing a Digital University to provide access to students across the country of world-class quality universal education with personalized learning experience at their doorsteps, recommends towards developing more such hubs and spoke models of education delivery. The Committee recommends that public universities can act as hubs with local institutions serving as the spokes, and can thus become a carrier of quality education to all parts of the country. Further, the Committee recommends that a new Phygital or Physical plus Digital (hybrid) way of instructions be experimented with in a structured manner and its impact assessed scientifically.
- The Committee recommends that donations and community contribution towards higher education institutions should be encouraged through appropriate policy measures. Donations by individuals, alumni and institutions should be encouraged through tax incentives. All donations to the higher education institutions should be 100% tax deductible. Institutions building a vibrant Alumni Base may be given some incentives in taxes and other charges.
- The Committee, noting that sincere efforts are required to attract and retain faculty with good research skills, recommends for undertaking a review of the current system of faculty recruitment, appraisal, assessment, promotions and for developing a rewards-based regime on performance measured through research contributions and publications. Also, the model of appointing talented alumni/senior students/Ph.D. scholars as Teaching Assistants, beneficial to the universities, faculty and research students, be studied and implemented. This will help such researchers/scholars to get exposure to the teaching skill and to mitigate the shortage of faculty in universities/institutions.
- The Committee recommends enhancing international collaborations in the form of student exchanges, faculty exchanges, joint teaching, research, conferences, publications, executive education programmes and study-abroad programmes as such activities will not only broaden the horizon of the participants but will also help in promoting the global engagement of Indian higher education institutions. The Committee strongly recommends that the Department must review and take appropriate action on the Destination India Report prepared by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).
- The Committee recommends that world class training programmes for academic administrators be developed as high quality education administration has generally remained a neglected aspect of the Indian higher education system. Also, courses such as Bachelor of School/College/University Management Science for non-teaching staff to manage educational services, exam management, academic administration need to be formulated as they form the backbone of any educational institution. The Committee further recommends that there should be Institutional Leadership/ Management courses for aspiring/existing Principals/ Administrative Heads of the Colleges/ Universities to give them exposure to the management skills required to lead the institutions.
- The Committee notes that even after several decades, many State Universities regularly fail in smooth and flawless conduct of examinations. Instances like — a) Question paper leak b) Administering a wrong question paper c) Confusion about seating arrangements and Exam centre d) Rampant cases of copying e) Framing questions that are out of syllabi f) Wrong examiners being appointed for assessment; and g) Student-Examiner Nexus etc. are still not uncommon.

- Hence the Committee recommends that the parameter of the Institution’s exam management competency be also considered as a mandatory norm towards consideration of accreditation. The NAAC and NBA should award marks to such universities/institutes who conduct examinations smoothly. Besides, experiments like the Question Bank system and adoption of complete digitization of the examination process by institutes/universities to ensure fair and timely conduct of examination and declaration of results, amongst others may be incentivised.
- The Committee notes the need to carefully examine, assess and analyze the issues and challenges for NBA and NAAC, through compilation of a structured feedback of HEIs so that requisite reform process can be taken forward to make these bodies a benchmark for quality accreditation. Also, it is recommended that the norms for frequency and periodicity of the accreditations be defined so that institutions do not develop a tendency to carry the score for years, without a review, which leads to complacency, and undermines quality mechanisms.
- The Committee recommends that the experiment of providing courses in humanities in technology institutions be reviewed so as to assess its impact on the academic climate in such institutions. However, keeping in view the broad thrust of NEP, 2020 towards holistic and multidisciplinary education, the Committee also recommends the incorporation of social sciences/ humanities/ arts modules in the technical education curriculum for the development of students with well-rounded personalities.
- The Committee, keeping in view the global trend in student learning, recommends that the Department of Higher Education along with its bodies must undertake an expert study to help provide avenues towards empowering students to chart their education pathways as per their needs and interest, leveraging traditional and other partnerships to bolster learning and making efforts towards ensuring widespread diffusion of education. The Committee, agreeing with the axiom of students becoming “the architect of their own education”, recommends that Universities must push for an open curriculum where students, instead of completing a set of core courses, can explore and sample a range of subjects before making their choice on what to pursue in depth and move towards taking greater ownership of their education, pursue education at their own pace, pave the way for lifelong, self-driven learning. The Committee recommends that UGC and other regulatory bodies should undertake an exercise towards realizing this aim.
- The Committee recommends the formulation of a Comprehensive National Research Policy encompassing all kinds of research activities- both in social as well as physical sciences— with explicitly defined norms and quantifiable parameters. While doing so, the Committee also recommends that all our well identified national developmental needs in social sector as well as infrastructure and science and technology be given high priority.
- The Committee recommends for a deep study on improving educational standards through innovation in education, especially through the use of technology and based on such a study, a blueprint be prepared for each of the HEIs to be followed to enhance the standards of education all across the country.
- Noting the growing commercialization of education in certain States and the disturbing trend of many colleges associating with coaching classes to prepare their enrolled students in certain cities, making the learning process a farce through this unholy nexus between coaching classes and colleges, the Committee recommends that the Government, in Noting the

growing commercialization of education in certain States and the disturbing trend of many colleges associating with coaching classes to prepare their enrolled students in certain cities, making the learning process a farce through this unholy nexus between coaching classes and colleges, the Committee recommends that the Government, in coordination with State Governments must work out mechanisms to curb such trends and punish such institutions by derecognizing them. Towards this end, the Committee recommends that a study group may be set up by the Central Government to assess the ground realities.

- The Committee taking note of the shortage of adequate and qualified faculty to provide quality education and observing that many young students are not attracted towards the teaching profession since the recruitment process is quite prolonged with many procedural formalities, recommends that the Department of Higher Education may consider some reforms to shorten the time. Also, the faculty may be encouraged to undertake consultancy on sharing of resources basis in a uniform manner.
- The Committee recommends that at least on an experimental basis a mechanism for ensuring the accountability and performance of faculties in the universities and colleges should be put in place similar to that of foreign universities where the performance of college professors/ teachers is evaluated by their peers and students. Such performance appraisal would help improve the quality of teaching.
- In order to enhance the quality of education, especially in the various fields of engineering, the Committee recommends mandatory mentoring of some chosen colleges, especially catering to students from a rural background or those located there, by the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Such mentoring should encompass all aspects, including faculty skill upgradation, infrastructure enhancement to help pave the way towards student excellence. IITs should also proactively engage and develop Question Banks and Model Tests etc. which can help other Colleges in improving their benchmarks of teaching students.
- The Committee recommends policy reform initiatives to fulfill the vision of “Atmanirbhar Universities” which abide by the vision of a ‘self-sustaining’ and ‘self-generating’ University. Towards the realization of this vision, the Committee also recommends towards adequate autonomy, growth friendly regulatory framework, enabling environment to raise significant financial resources and energizing towards innovation, entrepreneurship and collaboration of universities, under a defined policy to be formulated by UGC.
- The Committee recommends that the Department of Higher Education should formulate policies/ initiatives keeping in view the Master Plans that States formulate towards the higher education sector. This will help, on the one hand in better resource allocation and coordination between the States and the Ministry in extending financial support, and on the other curb the tendency of politicization of approvals for colleges by Universities and State Governments.
- The Committee recommends the adoption of the Cluster System in higher education, as a defined policy, through sharing of resources such as libraries, infrastructure, laboratories, best practices and other human resources which will prove beneficial and UGC must evolve norms towards such sharing by reputed universities/ IITs etc.

- The Committee recommends that the Government give an active consideration to the demand that deemed universities be allowed to use the term 'university' by amending Clause 23 of the UGC Act, 1956 which states that no institution, other than a university established or incorporated by a Central Act, a Provincial Act or a State Act is entitled to use the word 'University', as the term 'deemed university' creates a lot of confusion in foreign countries as there is no concept of deemed university in many parts of the world.
- Taking note of the fact that many deemed Universities in order to make quick money were starting Open Distance Learning courses undermining the qualitative research work, the Committee strongly recommends adequate measures to curb such tendencies after carefully examining the options.
- The Committee notes that many Universities and IITs as well as IIMs have started Incubation Centres. While these are steps in the right direction, the Committee recommends that the advisability of evolving a new branch of knowledge creation namely Incubation and Innovation Studies be explored. Such studies would help assess the impact of these centres as well as gather new insights into the sociology of the new start-up culture. This will also enable the assessment of incubation and innovation activities taking place in universities and monitor its success and failure.
- While the increasing usage of cutting edge technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Robotics, Virtual Reality etc. is welcome for several reasons, the Committee recommends that a task force should be set up at central level to explore the possibility of incorporating these new emerging technologies in contemporary syllabi and develop them for increasing the employment opportunities.
- The Committee recommends that the Department advise the HEIs to consider a 'Unipass' system like in many educational institutions abroad which comprises a digitally enabled card for utilization of all internal and external facilities provided by the HEIs and government to students. This is especially important given that most HEIs in India issue multiple paper cards like health card, library card etc. separately to students.



## SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: ORIGIN, STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

World peace has always been at the core of the decisions made at the global level. This is especially true in the case of Middle East Asia which has been wrought with border issues. The Middle East Asian countries including Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan formed the ‘Shanghai Five’ in 1996 in order to establish peace and ensure peaceful co-existence among countries with different cultural backgrounds in the aftermath of World War II. The Shanghai Five was therefore aimed at the reduction of military forces and deepening of military trust among the member countries so as to ensure mutual trust among the member states. Seeing the effectiveness of the Shanghai Five in the promotion of peace, stability and security; the member countries transformed it into a regional organization under the name of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the year 2001. In this context, a Joint Declaration admitting Uzbekistan as a member of the Shanghai Five mechanism was adopted and the Declaration on the establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization was signed by six member Countries. SCO came up with the objective of better cooperation among member states for combating threats of terrorism, separatism, and radicalism.

In the years after that ensued, SCO broadened the scope of its activities in the sphere of combating existing and emerging challenges.

It not only worked towards combating terrorism but also ensured the maintenance of international peace and security through its work in countering terrorism, cyberterrorism, separatism, extremism, transnational organized crime, and illicit drug trafficking, as well as reinforcing international information security and emergency response. SCO's core permanent body, RATS (Regional Anti Terrorist Structure) was successful in preventing 20 terrorist attacks in the planning stage itself. It further managed to avert 650 crimes of extremist nature along with the neutralization of 440 terrorist camps and 1700 members of international terrorist organizations. SCO Convention on Countering Extremism aids in the advancement of security and increases cooperation among authorities for improving the legal framework in that sphere.

SCO also worked towards impeding social radicalization so as to prevent it from manifesting myriad forms of extremism, racial intolerance, and xenophobia. Despite not being a military organization, SCO has been instrumental in curbing terrorist activities in the world. It has resulted in thwarting drug operations in the member states in accordance with the 2004 Agreement on Cooperation between SCO Member States in Combating Illicit Trafficking of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors and the 2015 Statement by the Heads of SCO Member States on Drug Threat. The joint efforts of the UN and SCO have already led to the seizure of 69 tons of heroin from the traffickers which constitutes 14 percent of the drugs confiscated worldwide.

In the historic Astana Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in 2017, India and Pakistan were granted full membership of the organization thereby expanding the spectrum of its opportunities and making it an organization that covers 44 percent of the world's population. SCO has become a key to maintaining the balance of power in the world by having four nuclear powers as its members. (United Nations, 2017)

Today, SCO is a permanent intergovernmental international organization comprising eight member-states (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) with its main focus on strengthening cooperation between member states on the issues of border security and political stability and enhancing ties in the fields of education, energy, transport, tourism, and environmental protection. It is working towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational international political and economic order and its decision-making is based on consensus. The Council of Head of States is the top decision-making body of the SCO which is responsible for deciding its internal functioning and its interaction with other states and international organizations. It determines priorities and defines major areas of activities of the Organisation and considers the most topical international issues. The venue of a regular meeting of the Council is determined in the Russian alphabetic order of names of the SCO member states.

The Council of the Heads of Government is the second highest council of the SCO that decides about the economic aspects of interaction within the organization and holds annual meetings of the member states thereby ensuring cooperation. It approves the budget of the organization and the venue for its meetings is decided by agreement among heads of government of member states. The Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs works upon issues related to the day-to-day activities of the SCO and meets regularly to discuss international situations. It is also responsible for preparation of meetings for Heads of State Council and makes statements on behalf of the SCO. This council meets a month prior to the meetings of the heads of State Council and its extraordinary meeting might take place on the initiative of at least two members having the consent of the others.

## THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION



The meetings of the Heads of Ministers agencies takes place for the consideration of particular issues. These meetings are subject to the decisions of teh Heads of State Council and the Heads of Government Council. Further, the SCO Secretariat is the permanent executive body of the SCO which coordinates the activities of the SCO and ensures cooperation of the members of the SCO with observer states and dialogue partners ad concludes agreements with the consent of the member statesThe last Summit of the Council of the Head of States of SCO was held in Samarkand, Uzbekis-

tan where India was handed over the SCO Presidency. India has come a long way from acquiring the observer status in 2005 to acquiring the presidency for the SCO summit 2023. India has a great responsibility as the current President of the SCO since it can not only herald a new era by cooperating with Pakistan over border issues and using SCO as a platform to fulfill its energy demands through regional diplomacy. The presidency can also provide India with an opportunity to further its ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ and check the growing influence of China in Eurasia.

Cooperation between authorities of SCO member States has proved to be fairly successful but it will be necessary to consolidate the efforts of the international community as a whole to deal with the challenges of the future. In this regard, the rise of SCO as a multilateral organization promoting growth and cooperation and India’s presidency would aid in making the entire world ‘one family’ which is in conformity with the interests of the world in general and the member countries in particular. India has to play a crucial role in balancing the world leaders from all parts of the world so as to maintain peace and stability as envisaged by the SCO since its genesis.

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## VARANASI'S NOMINATION AS SCO TOURISM AND CULTURE CAPITAL: A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR VARANASI AND INDIA

### Introduction

The soul of a country lies in its culture, which is manifested in both tangible and intangible forms. Culture “comprises the materials and spiritual wealth created in the history of human society. Culture is a social ideology as well as the systems and the institutions related to this, including ideas, political thoughts, legislation, morality, art, religion and science.” (Hanes & Andrei, 2015, p. 34) Every country has its unique culture, with many having a multiplicity of cultures, and even cultures within cultures. The world is like a melting potpourri of several cultural strands, where cultures are influencing each other, yet each one is retaining its individuality.

Culture is an essential element of a country's national identity, and it lends a nation-state with credible soft power at the international level. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a significant shift in the study and conduct of international relations, with the emphasis turning from military ‘hard power’ to ‘soft power’, comprising institutions, cultural influences, ideologies, etc. The American victory in the Cold War decisively came down to the liberal nature of the American political and socio-cultural system. In recent decades, many countries, international organisations and regional groupings have understood the significance of culture as

soft power, and have initiated people-to-people contact programmes and cultural initiatives. In this bandwagon, the recent entrant to join is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The G20 presents an excellent avenue to promote tourism through exhibitions and displays of the nation's remarkable cultural diversity. The events shall be covered internationally with numerous delegates from across the globe. With suitable representation and engagement, these programs may reel in tourists in the future. Thus, it is necessary to onboard members from all communities, especially those of lesser-known, distinct cultural backgrounds, into the G20 process for representation and make them "forefront Bhagidars" of the advancement process.

### **SCO, and the Tourism and Culture Capital Initiative**

Formed in Shanghai in 2001, SCO is currently the world's largest regional organisation, comprising of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Belarus, and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2019, during the Bishkek Summit of SCO, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of Uzbekistan, suggested the establishment of an annual tradition of nominating a city in the country presiding the SCO as the SCO Tourism and Culture Capital for that year. "The objective of this proposal is to realize the tourism potential of cities and promote the cultural and historic heritage of the SCO member states." ("Varanasi nominated as the first SCO Tourism and Cultural Capital", 2022) In 2021, the regulations for the nomination of the SCO Tourism and Cultural Capital were adopted at the Dushanbe SCO Summit. In September 2022, during the SCO Council of Heads of State meeting at Samarkand, India was handed over the rotating presidency of SCO for 2022-23, and Varanasi was announced as the SCO Tourism and Culture Capital for the year.

### **A Great Opportunity for Varanasi**

Located on the banks of the Ganges, Varanasi, also called Benares or Kashi, is regarded as a holy city by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. It is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities, and a prominent pilgrimage site for the Hindus. Lakhs of pilgrims head to Varanasi, to take a dip in the holy Ganges and 'wash away their sins', to cremate their loved ones, or to just simply absorb the sights and sounds of the City of Lights, notably its temples, the ghats like Assi and Dasashwamedh, and the famous Ganga Aarti.

With the announcement of Varanasi as the SCO Tourism and Culture Capital, the city is set to benefit in numerous ways, and there are positive implications for India as well. For starters, under the framework of this cultural outreach programme, Varanasi will be hosting a number of events during the year, and guests from the SCO member states will be invited. These events are expected to attract the likes of Indologists, scholars, authors, musicians and artists, photojournalists, travel bloggers, etc. The hosting of these events entails major infrastructural and developmental work to be undertaken in the city, which would be beneficial to the city as well as the country.

Also, in celebration of this recognition, the Government of Uttar Pradesh, in partnership with the Central Government, would launch various cultural and economic programmes, which would directly benefit Varanasi. Moreover, it will be a huge opportunity for Varanasi to showcase itself to the world promote its tourism potential and export its famous products like the Banarasi sarees, which will benef

-it the city economically. All in all, the city of Varanasi is set to materially benefit with this recognition.

### **Time for India to Leverage its Soft Power**

India also stands to gain from this overall initiative. A substantial boost will be provided to tourism, cultural and humanitarian exchanges between India and the SCO member states, and it will further bolster India's reputation as a tourism hotspot. India has a substantial reach in Eurasia-Central Asia in terms of soft power, with Bollywood films and songs being highly popular there. The Tourism and Cultural Initiative will help in building on this reach further.

The holy city of Varanasi provides a perfect platform for India to promote itself not just as a tourist and spiritual destination, but also to send out a symbolic message. This message can be understood in the context of India assuming the presidency of various multilateral groupings like the G20 and the SCO, as well as the present global scenario of conflict. The Russia-Ukraine war has put the world on the knives' edge, and has driven a wedge within the SCO itself as well. The world is now turning towards India, a rising global power, to play the role of a peacemaker in this conflict. India can use this opportunity by initiating peacemaking negotiations on the sidelines of major SCO cultural initiatives, and involving stakeholders like Russia, China and Kazakhstan. And what better place to hold these negotiations than Varanasi, the land where Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon (Sarnath is located in Varanasi district, 10 km northeast of Varanasi city).

Not just the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the SCO Presidency gives India an opportunity to take the lead in various matters, such as regional security, counterterrorism, trade and economic cooperation. With the security situation in Central Asia being delicate due to the activities of terror outfits like IS-Khorasan, India should be looking at ways to strengthen the counterterrorism framework, particularly the RATS(Regional Anti Terrorist Structure) Keeping the symbolic context in mind, and the weight of responsibility shouldered by India as this year's SCO President, the significance of Varanasi's recent recognition can be fully grasped.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, in conclusion, the declaration of Varanasi as the SCO Tourism and Culture Capital for the year 2022-23 has positive implications, for Varanasi at the ground level and for India at a broader level. The city will get to benefit materially, in terms of infrastructural investment, developmental work and tourism promotion. As for India, it will be a golden opportunity to leverage its soft power credentials, in light of its responsibilities as this year's SCO President, and the symbolic and cultural significance of Varanasi.

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## SCO MIDDLE EAST EXPANSION- AN OPPORTUNITY IN THE ENERGY SECTOR

### Introduction

The entire world is moving towards a more inclusive, representative and multipolar world order discarding the ideological blocs and confrontational approaches to development issues and security challenges (Menon, 2022). In this context, the Samarkand Declaration was a milestone in the 22nd annual Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit. The summit concluded with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for accepting Iran as a full member of the organisation and granting the status of dialogue partners to the Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the next meeting. Moreover, Egypt and Turkey in the West Asia North Africa (WANA) region have expressed interest in becoming a part of SCO (Priya, 2022).

The SCO was founded in 2001 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to safeguard themselves from transnational security threats of terrorism, separatism and extremism (Fulton, 2018). Later, it was extended to the economic and developmental realm by incorporating more Asian countries, including India and Pakistan (Fulton, 2018). The current expansionary trend of SCO illustrates its growing importance in global politics

It includes 40% of the world's population, 30% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and 22% of the planet's geographical area (Bhatia, 2022). The SCO thus envisions the architecture of an emerging regional order in Eurasia by acting as a multilateral mechanism to address contemporary issues such as security, stability and sustainable development (Priya, 2022). It is anticipated to be the most populous and richest regional cooperation with over three billion people, 17.5% of the world's oil wealth, nearly 50% of known natural gas reserves, and about 14 trillion dollars in GDP (Fulton, 2018).

On September 16, 2022, India took over the rotating SCO presidency. Hosting the next summit seems crucial for India (Sharma, 2022), especially in the wake of the looming global energy crisis. Correspondingly, the Gulf region's increasing interest in SCO shows their inclination to tie up with growing Asian powers or non-Western actors (Priya, 2022). Considering the stakeholder interests, the energy sector possesses the potential to forge viable partnerships across Asian economies.

#### Energy as a strategic resource - The role of SCO energy club

Founded by Russia, the SCO energy club encompasses the region of Eurasia, South and East Asia. It challenges western supremacy in framing energy policies, and its chief objective is to remove the logistic hurdles in marketing the energy resources of the SCO actors. Due to limited availability and geographic concentration, energy resources are strategically important and involve military, economic, and geopolitical aspects. Moreover, the energy sector has become critical in attaining sustainable development goals because of the climate crisis. Generally, an energy policy has four dimensions;

- i. Availability or the geological existence,
- ii. Accessibility or the factors influencing supply,
- iii. Affordability or the cost of availing the resource,
- iv. Acceptability or environmental and social costs.

Geography being a determining component of a country's outlook on the energy sector, the geopolitical concerns have compelled these states to scrutinise their energy policies.

The SCO members and their peripheral neighbours, including Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, currently hold the largest fossil fuel reserves on the planet. The region comprises 25% of the world's oil and 50% of total natural gas reserves, with its biggest market being its neighbourhood - Europe, South, and East Asia. One of the underlying objectives of the SCO Energy Club is to harness the potential of Central Asia's untapped energy reserves. Currently, the Middle East, with 64% of the world's known oil reserves, remains the largest source of import for most countries. It can be partly attributed to the region's global oil production and export capacity dominance. Moreover, the Persian Gulf possesses 38.4% of the proven natural gas reserves, with Qatar as the leading exporter of LNG. Due to the Russia-Ukraine war and its consequent energy supply bottlenecks, the axis of the energy sector is shifting towards Middle Asia. Creating a stable transportation infrastructure for the supply of LNG, one of the cleanest fossil fuels in demand, is decisive in this scenario.

Being the growing Asian superpowers of the SCO, both India and China have a huge demand for energy consumption yet a declining production-consumption ratio. As both countries suffer from twin issues of availability and accessibility, measures to diversify and securitise energy sources seem like the need of the hour. As the oil trade relations between the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting

Countries (OPEC) and the West have soured over the former's decision to cut down production for sustaining prices, the Middle East is eyeing Asian economies as its prospective partners. Considering these favourable circumstances, strengthening the SCO energy club is a feasible alternative.

The global trends in the energy sector

Given climate change and rising global energy demand, greener and self-reliant energy policies have become a priority in national and global development initiatives. China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is an example of an energy securitisation policy.

In 2020, nearly half of Chinese crude oil imports (47%) came from Middle Eastern countries, with Saudi Arabia (16%) as the largest supplier. Correspondingly, Iraq, Oman, UAE, and Kuwait are the top oil providers. Due to US-EU sanctions, Iran is becoming China's major oil exporting partner. Besides oil trade, China is tying up with Qatar, one of the largest LNG exporters (Liquified Natural Gas), accounting for 20% of Chinese LNG imports (Aluf, 2022). The dependence on the Middle East for oil and gas has elevated the region's strategic significance to Beijing. However, overseas expansion does not seem viable for China because of the maritime chokepoints and contested waterways the cargo has to move through - the Strait of Hormuz, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait (Aluf, 2022). Therefore, China has invested heavily in transnational pipelines in almost all directions to diversify its energy supply (Yilmaz & Daksueva, 2014). The anticipated Chinese pipeline network connects Russia in the north, then an interconnection of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in the West, and a link to Myanmar in the south for tapping its natural gas reserves (Yilmaz & Daksueva, 2014).

The BRI project includes not only the pipelines via SCO members' territories but also the collaboration with dialogue partner states who are key players in facilitating energy transportation to high fuel-demand economies such as India, China, Korea, Japan, and Europe. Either they act as crucial transit points or sea terminals. For instance, Sri Lanka has a major China-built LNG terminal at Hambantota (Giri & Agarwal, 2019). Moreover, the other critical domains for the BRI include economic cooperation with countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, and Syria in infrastructure building, telecommunications, technology, and particularly energy (Moonakal, 2022). The Chinese quest for global supremacy on all fronts makes BRI critical in developing global energy consumption beyond fossil fuels (Araya, 2022). The Middle Eastern expansion led by China is not merely a trade partner but a major investor in the Gulf's lucrative energy sector (Araya, 2022). China's state-owned Silk Road Fund recently acquired a 49% stake in Saudi-based ACWA Power Renewable Energy Holding. It also funds large-scale solar power projects through the Asian Development Bank in UAE and Oman.

For SCO, Central Asia being the core, the region's sustainable development constitutes a top priority. According to a recent study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), countries in the Middle East and Central Asia may have to spend \$884 billion on developing renewable energy plants between now and 2030 to meet their emission reduction targets (Dudley, 2022). Hence, the SCO has identified the transition towards renewable energy sources as an area for cooperation amongst its members (Lau, 2022). Hydrocarbon-rich Gulf countries are extending investments to the Central Asian energy market. The Saudi-based ACWA Power has signed US\$2.5 billion energy-related projects with Uzbekistan. The UAE is channelling its Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF) Mubadala in scaling up energy

and port infrastructure in the Central Asian region. Likewise, Qatar and Kazakhstan have entered numerous MoUs on oil and gas cooperation (Priya, 2022). Increasing multilateralism via the integration of economy, trade, and investment among rivals is the fulcrum of the Chinese foreign policy in balancing rivals. Due to US sanctions, China is one of the major markets for Iranian oil. Once Iran joins the SCO, it will motivate the OPEC countries to establish their presence due to geopolitical concerns. This arrangement will cater to developing a common energy strategy for Eurasia. The SCO could resist the dollar hegemony by promoting local currencies in energy trade, drawing from the gas deal model in yuan and rouble (Lau, 2022). Moreover, Iran could serve as an alternative energy transit hub for Central Asian countries, reducing the dependence on Russian ports reeling under trade sanctions (Priya, 2022).

### India and the energy sector

By 2025, India will put the second largest pressure, after China, on global energy resources. According to the current estimates, over 91% of the country's energy needs will have to be imported by 2032. Over 70% of India's energy consumption currently consists of fossil fuel sources (Khan, 2013). In the first quarter of 2020, India's 60% of oil and 55% of LNG imports came from Gulf countries (Mills, 2020). India's reliance on the Middle East is less likely to decrease soon, owing to its geographic proximity to the Middle East. Its location offers a clear advantage over China in maritime trade and security costs (Yilmaz & Daksueva, 2014). At the same time, India's geographic isolation from Central Asia and Russia locks it into an untenable position, leaving the Middle East as the only viable option. It has been an obstacle to India's source diversification via overland routes. Currently, India lacks fully functional transnational oil pipelines. The SCO presidency is a golden opportunity for India to strengthen its presence in the energy club and secure supplies from Middle Asia's abundant yet inaccessible natural gas reserves (Giri & Agarwal, 2019).

In the context of diversification of energy imports and supply chains, India has recently signed the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline or TAPI Treaty. However, India is yet to sign the agreement on the Iranian gas pipeline that passes through Pakistan but overland routes via Pakistan pose several security concerns for India (Yilmaz & Daksueva, 2014). Being a friend to most SCO members, India should leverage its diplomatic capital to build stable multilateral energy partnerships while ensuring collective security. By teaming up with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, India can utilise its position to revitalise connectivity initiatives, including the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar Port Project (INSTC) (Wani, 2022).

In light of India's mounting energy demands, the region will require capital investments in hydrocarbons and renewable energy (Mills, 2020). India plans to achieve energy self-sufficiency by 2032 using 25% renewable resources (Khan, 2013). Despite India's and Middle Eastern countries' geographic and economic closeness, investments in the energy sector amongst them are minimal (Mills, 2020). Although India is a major importer of crude oil, it is

also a huge exporter of refined oil. Saudi Arabia and UAE are looking to collaborate on oil refineries, petrochemical plants and storage facilities in India to serve its vast and growing market (Mills, 2020). India's National Infrastructure and Investments Fund has partnered with Dubai Ports to invest in India's logistics infrastructure (Wani, 2022). Likewise, the hydrogen-rich Gulf region and India can explore alternative arrangements to develop cleaner fuels (Mills, 2020). Being the Gulf region's foremost trade and labour market partner (Khan, 2013), India thus has a tremendous scope to enhance infrastructure in the energy sector. The addition of Iran to the SCO has also provided an opportunity for India to revive the uncompleted port development project.

### Conclusion

The SCO's efforts to securitise its energy policy encourage the members to pursue larger economic and political objectives. The current SCO expansion spree prioritising the energy sector indicates an evolving global governance structure with China-led Eurasia at its helm, challenging western dominance. India's presidency is pivotal in protecting multilateralism and coherency without letting the countries end up in a bloc under a superpower. It can steer the organisation's focus to meet common challenges and geostrategic concerns (Wani, 2022). By clubbing with the Middle East and Central Asian countries, India can contribute to addressing the current market slump and the much-needed energy technology transformation.

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## HOW CAN CHINA LEVERAGE SCO FOR ITS BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE?

Connectivity and Cooperation is the need of the 21st century and China's Belt and Road Initiative is one such flagship development strategy that seeks to build connectivity across six major economic corridors that cover most parts of Eurasia and South Asia. Inspired by the ancient Silk Road, the presence of which contributed to the expansion and flourishing of trade across Eurasia, the BRI also aims at creating and fortifying various economic flows and pathways to build cooperation in trade and other economic activities. First announced in 2013, and with projects in about 65 countries, this initiative is certainly an ambitious one that has been perceived as primarily aimed at large infrastructure projects that enable logistical efficiency in global trade and development (Chatzky and McBride, 2020).

The actual definition and scope of the BRI however, have thus far been rather hazy at best. The initiative has been described by China Daily as an “integration of spiritual and material human abilities to understand the world, change the world, and profoundly shape the destiny of humanity” (Ang, 2019). Further, in 2017, Xi Jinping described the initiative as “the project of the century” encompassing infrastructure, finance, trade, innovation, transportation, logistics, sustainability and people-to-people

ple connection. While this may seem rather definitive, at least on paper, the realities on the ground have been far more haphazard than one would expect. The only authoritative document made regarding the BRI for 2015-17 was an extremely vague seven pages of guidelines that left too much room for interpretation of this policy initiative (Ang, 2019). This can perhaps help explain the various criticisms and contentions that have persisted around the projects that fall under the BRI.

Observing Chinese overseas investments show us that the theoretical vagueness has resulted in practical confusion as posited by Yuen Yuen Ang in an article in the Foreign Affairs magazine. Given that there have been no official definitions for what constitutes the BRI, there have been all manner of Chinese interest groups taking advantage of the same by claiming their projects under the BRI. The deliberate vagueness in official documents stating principles of the BRI as to “go where the demand is” and “share responsibilities and progress together” has created room for various domestic interest groups to leverage it for procurement deals and cheap loans. Misuse of the BRI brand to extract profits has certainly hindered investments and bilateral agreements (Ang, 2019). Further, the tendency of BRI projects to be run by high-risk and low-interest loans as opposed to aid grants have raised several concerns about the phenomenon of “debt-trapping diplomacy”, whereby unsustainable Chinese credit has been settled through seizure of strategic and significant assets belonging to the indebted. The inability of various stakeholders to enforce any form of accountability and evaluate BRI projects has been problematic to say the very least. An increasing number of unfinished projects and a 54 per cent drop in BRI investments between 2019-2020 is rather indicative of the various aspects of the BRI that have gone awry (Business Standard India, 2021).

We must however acknowledge that in response to the various criticisms that have come up against the BRI, Beijing has attempted to recalibrate its approach to the BRI by clarifying its priority areas for execution. In 2019, the government clarified that open consultation, clean governance and green projects will be the focal points of the BRI. Further, in order to abate the confusion caused by the data gaps vis-a-vis projects that fall under the BRI, the Chinese government has also been working on establishing a list of legitimate BRI projects recognised by the former (Ang, 2019). However, in order for these reconfigurations to be effective, China must make more of a concerted effort towards encouraging bilateral and multilateral cooperation in trade and development.

At this juncture, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has presented itself as the ideal platform to make such negotiations. As a Eurasian organization that was born out of mutual concerns for border and regional security and stability, that later evolved to include trade and developmental objectives, the SCO has had a critical role to play in encouraging cooperation and responding to the various fears and criticisms surrounding the BRI. China’s geographical and political standing within the SCO provides better access to Europe. The resource richness of all the SCO members combined has further made SCO an opportune congregation of actors with the capacity to improve regional connectivity, trade and cooperation. Industrial and energy cooperation under the banner of the SCO has also seen a lot of potential. Combined, the members of the SCO possess about 50 per cent of the world’s natural gas reserves. This is certainly an added advantage with respect to reducing Chinese import dependency from the Middle East. Cooperation in the energy sector is now more crucial than ever, particularly given the various disruptions in the global supply chain for energy after the war in Ukraine (Rab and Zhilong, 2019).

There are several structural advantages to leveraging the SCO for economic and trade cooperation. Ensuring the free flow of goods, capital and technology necessary for the BRI has provided China with a safe space to expand and accelerate growth, particularly in collaboration with the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), ASEAN and other such organizations. The Qingdao declaration of the 2018 SCO summit was one that witnessed unanimous agreement amongst the member states (except India) to endorse and encourage investments in BRI projects. Expansion of connectivity and trade into the hinterlands of Central and West Asia via BRI projects could continue to be extremely advantageous to Chinese domestic and foreign interests. This is particularly true when it comes to the expansion of the expeditionary capabilities of the People's Liberation Army, which has been steady to increase its presence across Asia and Africa in order to protect Chinese assets (which have hitherto been categorized as projects under the BRI) (Rab and Zhilong, 2019).

However, in order to ward off negative connotations attached to the projects under BRI, Beijing must make more of an effort to establish strict regulatory frameworks with mutual development at its crux. Given the multitude of protests that have taken place across countries where BRI investments had earlier gained traction, it is important for the state to consider well-researched, contextual, strategic and mutually beneficial pathways to establishing bilateral and multilateral agreements to expand the BRI. At the helm of the SCO, China is certainly positioned well enough to be able to influence the scope of these agreements.

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Source: eurasiareview

## **RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT TO OPEN UP FISSURES WITHIN THE SCO**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine launched a large scale conflict in Europe which triggered unsavory responses from all over the world and has resulted in a series of political and economic consequences, that continue to reshape both Ukraine and Russia's neighbours. All SCO members are dealing with the overwhelming psychological and financial impact of the conflict which was displayed in the cold responses towards Russia from the organisation's strongest players

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which includes Russia, China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan held its meeting on 15th September, 2022 in Uzbekistan. It raised concerns about the Russian conflict with Ukraine taking centre stage, with its purpose being questioned due to the internal disagreements within the group. Apart from SCO being a brainchild of Russia and China, that was originally formed in 2001 to strengthen regional cooperation against terrorism amongst Central Asian countries, it has now acquired a broader significance with a combined GDP of nearly 30% of the world and 40% of the world's population. Thus it becomes imperative for Putin to maintain strong diplomatic ties in the region.

Putin's participation in the meeting was to gain support from the other members of the organisation (notably China and India), which is of immense importance to the Russian President in domestic politics. This support would help strengthen the social legitimacy of the regime. In general, the Ukraine war has deeply disappointed majority of the nations in the SCO and has largely derailed the goals of the SCO. Kazakhstan has continuously supported Ukraine in this war and India publicly acknowledged the food and fertilizer shortages, supply chain disruptions, particularly of fuel caused by the war. The Indian PM used SCO as a medium to share his disapproval of the crimes being committed by Russia by mentioning the unprecedented food and energy crisis. He reiterated the importance of democracy, diplomacy and dialogue for a reliable and resilient future.

The Indian PM rebukes came shortly after the nation was under fire from the West for buying oil from Russia at discounted prices. For Beijing, the crisis proved to be a revealing test for the scope and limits of their foreign policy, particularly across Eurasia where the SCO has been one of China's main vehicles for engaging with Central and South Asia. China expects the SCO to play a major role for developing its bilateral ties with Moscow but Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the blowback with that means that SCO is set to enter a period of revaluation with Xi being unhappy with how Putin has handled the invasion and the complications that have risen due to it.

China is in a quandary where its task is to embrace the desire of most member nations to embrace distance from Russia while still politically backing Moscow in the war, where it has often echoed Russian narrative and refused to condemn the alleged war crimes in Ukraine. Regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine, Russia and China declared their willingness to share the responsibility and readiness to play a leading role in bringing stability at the global level and to strongly support each other on issues concerning the key interests of each side. However, there were no declarations of increased Chinese support for the Russian Federation. The event also publicly exposed the divergence of positions between Kremlin and its key partners (notably India, but partly also China) on the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Statements at the summit clearly suggested their concern about the destabilising consequences the war was having on energy security, food security and trade flows, they also indicated a desire for a swift end to the conflict.

Russia cannot ignore lukewarm allies at the moment and it has entered a phase where it has to wait for responses and rebukes from equally powerful and less powerful nations. The parties in their final declaration criticised unilateral sanctions in a general manner and expressed the need to combat terrorism and radicalism.

Russia needs to assure the SCO member nations that a swift diplomatic resolution of the current crisis in the foreseeable future is plausible to bridge the deep divisions caused in the organisation and talks for peace between the two nations needs to be pushed. It also needs to remember its strong historical ties with Ukraine that have been jeopardised due to its authoritarian stance and have pushed the nation for support from the West, which has already isolated Russia. The SCO is also at the cusp of being called hypocritical if it doesn't display disappointment over Kremlin advances in Ukraine, as it goes against its core goals of jointly safeguarding regional peace and security that is displayed through large scale 'Peace Mission' drills that involve all member nations. The SCO members need to take neutral stand in case of the Russia-Ukraine war so as to fulfill its goal of promoting world peace and avoid the growing fissures within the organization.

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## SCO SERVING AS A WAY FOR INDIA'S GROWTH

The world has become quite interconnected in the 21st century and the relationship among countries has become crucial in light of the ever-changing global dynamics. The increasing importance of organisations like the SCO bears testimony to the pertinence of interrelationships among countries and their membership can pave the way for the growth and development of member countries. In this context, India's presidency of the SCO can be instrumental in the growth of India. The **Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO)** is a nine-member multilateral organization established in 2001. Currently, **China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan** are its members. It covers approximately 44% of the world's population and 26.6% of the total area of the globe, holding an important place in Eurasian as well as global affairs (Muratbekova, 2019). It is an intergovernmental forum having political, economic and security alliances with the core aim of ensuring (Kumar, 2022) political stability in the Central Asian region and enhancing intra-regional cooperation. The SCO also aims to strengthen engagement and improve trade and development in the Eurasian region with a motive to boost economic cooperation in the Central Asian republics and the other members of the SCO.

## India's Entry Into SCO

India's involvement with the SCO started in 2005 when it joined the organisation as an **observer state** and had a limited role. India has been a full member of the SCO since June 2017, with the establishment of the SCO Division in the Ministry of External Affairs and the appointment of a National Coordinator and Permanent Representative to the SCO. There has been consistent attendance of India at various SCO meetings.(MEA, 2022).

With the emergence of SCO as a permanent regional international organization consisting of Eurasia's key players with rich energy resources, SCO became quite pertinent in the Eurasian region. SCO has acted as a catalyst for the enhancement of India- Central Asia relations when India lacked entry into Central Asia due to the absence of any direct borders. India's role has evolved from an observer to a member of the SCO and it has significantly worked towards increasing its political, economic and defence cooperation with the Central Asian Region and other members through the SCO.

## The Significance of SCO for India

The significance of the SCO is quite clear from the fact that its security and political dimensions have recently begun to grow. Its credibility and influence as a regional international organisation have grown incrementally and the physical and strategic location of the SCO is significant to India. (Lakhoria, 2022) Therefore, SCO is an integral part of India's multi-alignment strategic engagement with the region's preeminent powers. (Kumar,2022) . It is crucial for India as it provides a convenient platform for connecting and engaging with Central Asian states. Through SCO, India can also persuade the member countries to support its connectivity and development initiatives. In addition, the SCO provides India with a platform to become more internationally visible in Eurasian geopolitical matters. The SCO, as a discussion forum, possesses the potential to increase trust and cooperation between India and the other SCO members. As a result, this regional organisation can help India better serve its geostrategic, security, and economic interests in the Eurasian region. (MEA | Statements: In Focus Articles, 2013)

SCO also provides India with a platform to **constructively engage** with its neighbours Pakistan and China. As India has border issues with both of its neighbouring nations, because of this their relations also remain severely disturbed. Even with multiple clashes, it is important for the regions leading powers, India and China to cooperate in the future, and SCO would help in bringing together both these nations and hence boost India's growth in the region. Thus SCO can provide a platform for India to peacefully deal with these nations. Through SCO India can work towards **neutralizing religious extremism and terrorism** issues. India can also bring about awareness in SCO about Pakistan's terrorism-related activities, which are a major bone of contention between both neighbours.

## Opportunities For India In SCO

India's entry into the SCO has led to the opening up of a Pandora box of opportunities for India. India has been striving to strengthen its relations with the Central Asian Republics through Connect Central Asia and the SCO presidency can work towards enhancing such initiatives and Asia's Cooperation will ultimately help in shaping the century. India is also committed towards its dedication to the

"Extended Neighbourhood Policy," which urges New Delhi to broaden its geopolitical partners and diplomatic goals, as well as its willingness to engage Central Asian partners on a variety of fronts. (Schulz, 2022 )

India is currently working on engaging with CAR's in areas such as establishing transport links, security issues, energy, and so on. Since entering the SCO India has laid greater focus towards **regional integration** and especially towards enhancing its **connectivity** in the region of Central Asia. It has been making persistent efforts towards promoting connectivity between India and Central Asia. As a member of the SCO, India could also perhaps prioritise support for three major North-South connectivity proposals with Indian participation. These are the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects the European Union to India and ASEAN via Russia and Iran; the Chabahar Port and Railway, which connects India to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia via Iran; and the Vladivostok-Chennai sea lane of communication, which connects India to Russia's Far East, as well as countries that partner with India in her "Act East" policy. (Mukerji, 2020)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides a useful platform for New Delhi to interact with its regional counterparts on a wide range of regional, security, and political issues. India, as the world's largest democracy, has not only expressed its views and vision on these issues but has also persuaded others to support the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan and aid in the restoration of peace and economic recovery. (Wani,2022) . India has also expanded its military cooperation with the CAR's by holding joint military exercises that validate India's security partnership with Central Asia and assist India in establishing comprehensive partnerships throughout Central Asia. India has also focused on defence technology and trade cooperation, and it has begun to engage with CAR countries in the areas of capacity building, human resource development, information technology, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, small and medium enterprises, and entrepreneurship development.

India stands to benefit greatly from a growing international organisation such as the SCO, particularly in the case of dominating Eurasian affairs. It has consistently advocated for **increased collaboration** on regional security, defence, counter-terrorism, the illicit drug trade, and other issues since it became a member of the SCO. Furthermore, India has also requested **direct access** to the SCO's counterterrorism organisation, RATS based in Tashkent which will provide crucial counter-terrorism data related to Pakistan and will aid in establishing a stable Afghanistan. Through the SCO, India can also access the **Eurasian markets** as India has immense economic and energy interests. (Singh, 2014) Energy security has also become a prime topic of discussion in international politics and has emerged as a prime national interest of the countries. With the growing importance of the Eurasian region being rich in energy resources, the SCO can help India in building economic cooperation between India and the CAR's which would be beneficial for India's energy interest. India's initiative in this regard is the **TAPI**- Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India gas pipeline. Through SCO India can also boost its trade and development with the Central Asian Republics and further meet its energy requirements. As Central Asia is the key energy region, India's aim of attaining energy security can be served through the forum of SCO.

## **SCO'S Future with India's Presidency**

At the 2022 Samarkand Summit of the SCO, India assumed the rotating presidency of the SCO (2023). This provides a chance to India become a key player in the Eurasian region, India which is an emerging economy, and is currently one of the best performers in its region alongside China, has bright future prospects in the politics of this region. India will also be hosting the SCO summit in 2023. Its future in the region looks very bright, as India is liked by the majority of the CAR's and Russia is an old friend. India has also maintained good relations with most member states. Whereas opposition from its bordering nations such as Pakistan and China could be possible when India assumes the leadership but its overall peaceful relationship with the majority of the member states will help to India to emerge as a great leader of the SCO. As a leader India can impact other SCO members to promote connectivity, and peace within the region and try to navigate through the differences with China and Pakistan. Through diplomacy and dialogue it can also help Russia to mediate differences with Ukraine and opt for conflict resolution rather than war.

Through the platform of SCO India can boost its growth and position in the region, emerge as the key player in Eurasian politics. India's SCO presidency would also ensure the promotion of peace, prosperity, and stability throughout the Eurasian region in general, and among SCO members in particular. (Wani, 2022). As India has had peaceful relations with most member states especially Russia and the CAR's, Through assuming SCO's presidency it will help to promote world peace and resolve differences and security issues within the member states, ensuring peace in the Eurasian region.

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## CHINA'S STRING OF PEARLS AND INDIA'S COUNTER DIAMONDS

The words of maritime strategist Alfred Mahan ring true: 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, and the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.' It stands particularly true in the context of the struggle for gaining maritime influence in the region. Understanding the importance of the Indian Ocean in geopolitics is a prerequisite to the String of Pearls theory. The Indian Ocean region consists of 28 countries spanning three continents and covers 17.5 percent of the global land area. These countries include 21 major nations like Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Oman, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UAE, and Yemen.

The Indian Ocean region is therefore home to some of the fastest-growing littoral states in the world. It falls at the crossroads of global trade connecting the international economies in the North Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. Apart from maritime trade routes, the Indian Ocean contains some of the most precious resources in the world. It is said that 16.8 percent of the entire world's reserves and 27.9 percent of natural gas reserves are in the Indian Ocean itself (Kannangara et al., 2018). Moreover, the major sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and America lie

in the Indian Ocean.

Interestingly, 80 percent of the entire world's maritime oil trade flows through just three narrow passages of the Indian Ocean (Jeffrey, 2019). These passages are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. These points are known as the choke points since the central part of world trade itself will come to a standstill if we choke these points. The Strait of Hormuz is between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. The Strait of Malacca is between the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian Island of Sumatra. The Bab-el-Mandep is a strait between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, Djibouti, and Eritrea in the horn of Africa. This strait connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Eden, and apart from these three choke points, we have four more: the Mozambique channel, the Swiss Canal, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait. These choke points present in the Indian Ocean make the region quite pertinent in establishing supremacy in the world order and China is trying to fulfill that objective through its String of Pearls.

#### The String of Pearls Theory

The String of Pearls theory has been discussed for over a decade. The phrase 'String of Pearls' was first used in 2005 in a report titled "Energy Futures in Asia" by the then-US defence contractor Booz Allen Hamilton. It claimed that China had bases from the Middle East to southern China as part of a "string of pearls" strategy. To extend their dominance abroad and safeguard their oil exports, the Chinese constructed these "pearls" in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar.

According to the "String of Pearls" theory, China wants to build port bases along vital nodes linking crucial SLOCs to project power and protect its oil supplies. The Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Djibouti's naval base, and Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port connect to form what is being called the Strings of Pearls theory. For the past two decades, China has been building infrastructure projects in these countries and regions that fall in the trade route of its oil imports and exports to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Projects to create infrastructure are also considered strategic "pearls" along the "string" since they would make it easier to deliver energy resources to the Chinese mainland. The idea contains intrinsic diplomatic and economic connotations due to the emphasis on energy sources and the requirement for coordination with regional governments to create infrastructure initiatives.

Further, China has significant influence over all the choke points due to its objective of establishing dominance over the Strait of Hormuz. It has put a guard in Pakistan on a 40-year lease and has its infrastructure and railway lines to Iran to establish dominance over the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Swiss Canal. It has dead-trapped Djibouti to build its naval base and capitalize on the Strait of Malacca, Sunda Strait, and the Lombok strait. China has strategically allied with Indonesia to build its infrastructure project and with the Mozambique government to establish control over Salaam port in Tanzania. This level of Chinese control over the choke points can bring world trade to a halt.

Thus, the Indian Ocean is a highly crucial region, and more so for India, because of China's growing influence in the region. China has established dominance around India's coasts that serve as an essential channel for trade, a sustainable resource base, and a region secure from the heightened military competition in the Indian Ocean. (Jaishankar, 2016). China is therefore trying to encircle India with several naval bases and surrounding countries in such a way that it is like a string of pearls around India's neck. The Chinese can then tighten to choke Indian trade affairs.

i However, India has a reasonably robust neck that cannot quickly be strangled and it has come up with its own Necklace of Diamonds to safeguard itself from the Chinese threat that looms over India in the form of ‘String of Pearls’

Instead of openly and boldly announcing its strategy like China, India has been slowly and steadily operating in a stealth mode with something called the Necklace of Diamonds strategy. India has set up trade relations with countries through various trade agreements, in addition to the countless visits by the Indian PM to strategically establish and strengthen the nation's ties with foreign countries.

First, India has placed its base in Oman's Duqm port to counter China's strategic placement at Gwadar and Djibouti. Located on the southeastern seaboard of Oman, straddled along the critical sea lanes in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Eden overlooking the Indian Ocean, India's crude imports flow from the Persian Gulf through this port. India shares good relations with Oman and has military access to this port, making it a great defence point. The second choke point is the Mozambique channel. In 2015, India signed an agreement with the Seychelles President to develop Assumption Island for military use. Unfortunately, after their domestic pandemonium and a change in government, this diamond is now in a shaky situation.

To earmark another essential choke point, the Strait of Malacca and the two other choke points beside it, India signed an agreement with the government of Singapore in 2018, providing us with direct military access to the Changi naval base. The Indian Navy can refuel and rearm its ship while sailing through the South China Sea. This was followed by another agreement for Indian military access to the Sabang port in Indonesia, located at the entrance of the Malacca Strait. Theoretically, we have a firm grip over the strait of Malacca through which 70 percent of China's oil supply and 60 percent of their trade passes. So, choking this point is like choking the Chinese economy itself.

We have historically had a great relationship with Vietnam and supply some of the most important defence equipment to them, having been in a comprehensive strategic partnership since 2016. India and Japan signed the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement in 2020 that allows the militaries of these countries to exchange supplies and services on a reciprocal basis so both countries can support each other as per their strategic requirements. India has established a solid relationship with Mongolia by giving out a one-billion-dollar credit to develop an air corridor for the state. These ties give us a very close placement to mainland China itself.

Lastly, we have the Chabahar port in Iran. Iran is a part of the Chinese BRI initiative wherein they have a railway line from China to Iran passing through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan to finally ending at Tehran. In 2015, India agreed to develop a deep-water port in Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman when facing crippling economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. India later signed another agreement worth 500 million dollars to develop this port and related infrastructure.

These diplomatic moves become all the more significant in context of the assumption of the SCO presidency in India since India would have several opportunities for increased engagement and interaction with the SCO members which can help India in neutralising the threat of China's ‘String of Pearls’ and establish itself as a leader in the global arena. The SCO could become a platform to provide connectivity and trade opportunities for Central Asia by raising the bar for Chabahar Port and International North-South Transport Corridor with Iran's membership. Accordingly, India could project the 'Indian model' of development and prosperity (Sharma, 2022).

The Indian Ocean is fundamental to the aim of China to fashion a Sino-centric Asia. China's subtle policy, gnawing away at India's inherent geopolitical advantage, draws strength from its more forceful quest for supremacy in the East and South China Seas. India therefore needs to concentrate on the ways to cope with China's influence in the Indian Ocean instead of questioning China. The Necklace of Diamonds is a step in the right direction and India's presidency at the SCO also raises our hopes in directing regional development in such a way that it ensures geopolitical security and becomes instrumental in enhancing India's relations with the Middle East. India's relations with all its diamonds and the recent developments at the global platforms like the SCO and G20 can therefore ensure that the dragon is kept tractable.

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